Beyond Time and Space? Reading the Possibilities of the Internet through Innis’s *The Bias of Communication*

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Harold A. Innis’s *The Bias of Communication* is one of the ‘staples’ of media theory – yet the theorist himself did not live to apply his findings to the newest paradigm shift in the mediascape. I aim to fill this gap by examining the internet in terms of the Innisian theory of the biases of time and space as two factors that greatly influence an entire society’s makeup, its culture, and institutions. Thus, in Part One, I will briefly delineate Innis’s theory and, in Part Two, explicate my interpretation of it in terms of its applicability to the digital media, which is a pressing topic of our day as the internet diminishes the importance of both time and space for communication by virtue of being both instantaneous and ubiquitous. After all, it is not a coincidence that globalization and the new media are inextricably linked. Rather, we have grown to live in a network society that applies the logic of the internet to every aspect of life. In Part Three, I will explain – using the example of present-day consumer and anti-globalization protest cultures – how the internet, although frequently seen as technologically determining its users, offers more manoeuvring room in terms of agency and participation than traditional one-directional broadcasting media.

Staking Out the Premises

While waiting in line for a coffee we update our Facebook status to communicate our boredom, find out which movie is playing, email the Professor about an extension of an essay deadline, order a book on Amazon, watch the latest missed episode of our favourite TV show, download movies and music, rent a car or buy a bus ticket, check our bank account, upload pictures, publish poetry, skype, tweet and blog – this list could be continued *ad infinitum*. In short, the internet, more and more, defines who we are, how we construct our identities, how we communicate, and, in turn, how we interact in face-to-face situations with other people - just as, according to Harold A. Innis, other dominant media were defining for preceding epochs. It is described as both impersonalizing communication device in the service of an alienated, globalized society and as democratizing tool that can help connect people across time and space. The internet seems to be ubiquitous and pervasive, yet utterly ungraspable as it is incessantly in the process of changing, which is why its boundaries are difficult to pin down. Any attempt to make a general statement about its nature must necessarily be
simplifying and polarizing. Furthermore, as we today are fully and completely immersed in this new form of producing and consuming communication and information, it is impossible to objectively look at the system from the outside, which makes processing the superabundance of data even harder. We suffer from what John Naughton calls “informed bewilderment.”

While being aware of these pitfalls at all times, I will undertake, firstly, an analysis of Innis’s theory on the spatial and temporal biases. After that I will look at its applicability to digital media in the face of the growing importance of the internet, social networking applications, and the ramifications of “glocalization.” For the purpose of an example I chose present-day consumer and anti-globalization protest cultures, as the media upheaval from analogue to digital media and the technological innovations greatly influence these movements, which have always been interestingly positioned at the intersection of society, politics, economics, and culture. At that point, then, we must begin to question the technological determinism that came to reign among Innis’s theoretical successors – McLuhan and Baudrillard as the most renowned among them – and weigh it against other viable approaches that allow for more agency, such as the idea of democratic communicative action by James Tully.

Certainly, the most fundamental question is whether the media creates us as consumers or whether we create the media as its producers – which also leads us into ideological debate. Yet, I believe that, when negotiating both extreme positions, we can steer clear of defeatist technological determinism on the one side and an idealist belief in the democratizing and decentralizing potential of the internet on the other side. A medium that suspends both time and space – as it is instantaneous, both everywhere and nowhere, encompassing the whole globe and thus rendering space more and more irrelevant – has the potential of being utilized for both conservative and revolutionary purposes, for

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1 In simple terms, Innis theorizes that every empire has a bias either towards space or towards time, which is highly influenced by the type of media predominant in the respective society. Heavy media, such as stone or clay, are durable yet hard to transport. Therefore, they favour a monopoly of knowledge and a bias towards time, since continuity can be ensured over centuries. Light media, like paper, electronic and digital communication, are easily transported and thus favour spatial expansion and a monopoly of power. Yet, they are more perishable and cannot guarantee continuity. For an empire to last, a balance has to be reached between the spatial and temporal biases. If this equilibrium is not achieved, a society is doomed to eventually fall apart.

2 I am indebted to the collaborative research centre “Medienumbrüche” [media upheavals] at the University of Siegen, Germany, for which I had the pleasure of working as research assistant in its sociological subproject “Transnational Corporate Campaigns and Digital Communication.” For more information, please refer to www.protest-cultures.uni-siegen.de/engl/index.html.

3 For the sake of brevity I will not address the question of access to the internet in developing and third-world countries. Whenever I refer to the internet’s global reach and its transcendence of geographical barriers I refer to the potentiality of it being a global medium, without claiming that access to the necessary technology is indeed universal, since many people lack both the money and the infrastructure to utilize it. In lieu of geographical barriers we thus have financial and social barriers that perpetuate existing power relations.
paddling “with or against the prevailing current” (Tully 206).

**Biases of Time and Space**

In *The Bias of Communication*, Innis undertakes the project of delineating a comprehensive history of communications media with the aim of connecting it to the respective society’s makeup, its culture, its values, its strengths, and its eventual demise, as media in general have “an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time” (Innis 33). His basic postulation is that every society has a bias either towards time or towards space, which can be seen when looking at that society’s predominant media and its institutional power structures. Analyzing the bias of a given empire helps us understand how power structures were (or are) maintained and reproduced through technology and administrative institutions (such as the leader, hierarchy, religion, laws, education, etc).

The preoccupation in ancient Egypt, for instance, to leave enduring monuments that ensure the continued reverence of the people for their pharaohs and mediate between past and present, between the worlds of the living and the dead, displays a clear bias towards time. Other hallmark characteristics of heavy media are a focus on oral tradition, spiritualism and religiosity, community, continuity, hierarchy, and decentralization. After all, hieroglyphs engraved in stone and clay are not easily transported and thus work against spatial expansion. What Innis considers essential is an empire’s adaptability, such as the recognition that new media require different handling than the traditionally dominant ones. If changes in (physical and technological) circumstances are not reacted to quickly enough, a bias or monopoly might prove exceedingly destructive, even though it might have served that same empire well before.

An empire which is marked by a decided bias towards space would be one relying primarily on light media, such as papyrus and paper, that are easily transported and therefore allow for those in power to easily govern huge masses of territory (and people). Other characteristics are the striving for expansion, a focus on written tradition, individualization, discontinuity, centralization, and democracy. The British Empire, with its intricate network of colonies and trade relations (with London as its uncontested centre, displaying its power through impressive architecture), is one example of an empire only conceivable in a setting that allows the government to make its will, ideology, and power known in all corners of the world as quickly as possible. The focus necessarily is on the written (and later printed) word and a bureaucratic apparatus to manage and govern

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4 Papyrus and the written word become important in the later dynasties, challenging a profoundly oral tradition, and are, as Innis argues, almost immediately followed by a decline in royal authority and the transformation into an oligarchy by an elite caste of priests (35; 67) – a great example of how dissemination of knowledge and the predominant power structures are intertwined.
these huge masses of land and sea. However, Innis never neglects to emphasize that media developments exist within a broader framework of technology, innovation, and history. Therefore, other technological innovations must be considered as playing a vital part in establishing the empire’s hegemony, such as reliable compasses, faster ships, and increasing nautical and geographical knowledge.

Innis’s theory is generally based on a broad, commonsensical understanding of the concept “medium.” His theoretical roots are firmly planted in his early studies of Canadian economic history in which he examines the importance of certain staple goods (fur, cod, timber, etc.), as well as means of transportation (railroad, waterways), for the nation’s development. Later, when shifting his interest to media, he maintains his interest in contextualized “transmission,” merely exchanging “goods” for “information.” Naughton proposes a biological analogy that strikes us as fitting:

[In biology] a medium is a mixture of nutrients needed for cell growth [which is] used to grow tissue cultures – living organisms. […] What I want to do is apply that perspective to human society: to treat it as an organism which depends on a media environment for the nutrients it needs to survive and develop. Any change in the environment – in the media which support social and cultural life – will have corresponding effects on the organism. Some things will wither; others may grow; new, mutant, organisms may appear. The key point of the analogy is simple: change the medium, and you change the organism. (2)

The interdependence between human society as a living organism and its dynamic environment (including changing communications media and technologies) is apparent in this explanation and surely would have found an ardent supporter in Innis. The idea of a dynamic relationship is certainly at the core of his entire theory and gets lost if one approaches The Bias of Communication with more rigid notions of medium, message, and causality. Innis implies that it is not the new technology that is simply ‘invented’ and requires adaptation by society – as McLuhan would theorize later – but that a society’s desire to tackle existing problems or imbalances leads to innovation.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that Innis is interested in what Alexander Watson calls “apolitical scholarship” (Innis xvii) – it is not his intention to declare one episteme or one culture as inherently “better” or “worse” than another. Rather, he thinks a balance between the importance invested in the concepts of space and time to be crucial in order for an empire to be stable and enduring (Innis 64). However, a disequilibrium between the two emerges almost inevitably because durable and permanent media engender monopolies of intelligence, as they ensure continuity in teaching and transmitted knowledge, whereas perishable and light media favour monopolies of force (or power),
as they facilitate military operations and spatial expansion. Being highly critical of these monopolies, Innis claims that if an imbalance proves to be increasingly severe it will necessarily lead to the respective empire’s downfall. Especially his contemporary society is judged harshly by means of his theory, since Innis sees a sense of superficiality and a preoccupation with amusement and entertainment creep into every aspect of the media, and thus of society. The Western world has slowly lost interest in time and durability in favour of a dangerous present-mindedness, leading to short-term planning in economy and politics which have caused and will continue to cause many problems through its lack of foresight (Innis 87-88). Innis closely links this phenomenon to the Western bias towards the written word and wishes for a return to (some of) the positive aspects of oral traditions – but more of that later.

The Internet

After Innis’s death, a new form of medium has gained primacy and has irreversibly changed our media landscape – many different scholars have even gone so far as to call the transition from analogue to digital media a paradigm shift. If this, indeed, is a new episteme, marked by discontinuity from the past, we must ask ourselves what type of bias and monopoly we are confronted with now. With the emergence of the electronic mass media during his lifetime, Innis already perceives a growing imbalance in the West, especially in the United States, which would, according to him, lead to its eventual demise. This disequilibrium is due to a sacrificing of time on the altar of an unprecedented “worship” of space, superficiality, and entertainment. First, however, I should start by describing the internet in Innisian terms.

The internet is, by definition, a network that connects individuals (or rather their PCs), companies, and institutions from all over the world, making possible and greatly encouraging globalization. Clearly, this qualifies for a bias towards space, as it has never been easier to communicate quickly and efficiently and make large spaces (in fact, the whole world) manageable through communication. Online data in binary code does not weigh anything and is accessible from virtually any PC, notebook, cell phone, BlackBerry, and so forth, anywhere on the globe, which means that not even the hardware has to be transported. Also, it affects the media landscape in a crucial way. No longer is it focused on one-directional broadcasting, as with traditional media like TV or radio through which single producers (or companies) send out their information to many passive receivers. Instead, the internet allows any individual in possession of information to publicize it and, if she finds someone who is interested, engage in an interactive, multi-directional exchange with other individuals, who thus play an active role. Space and the costs it brings with it in terms of transportation are no longer an issue, as far as mediated communication is
concerned. Throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries, newspapers, radio programs, and TV were created by a few for the masses and a clear monopoly of information was established. However, with the internet, broadcasting can originate in any living room with the help of a computer, an internet connection, and the necessary software (Naughton 9). This clearly is a democratization of the processes of media production, distribution, and consumption and it only becomes possible because the importance of space (and thus of transportation and financial means) is diminished.

In view of the interactive component of the internet, I would even go so far as to claim that it has helped to re-inject some of the “spirit of orality” which, Innis claims, is lacking in modern electronic mass media. He postulates that

> oral discussion inherently involves personal contact and a consideration for the feelings of others, and it is in sharp contrast with the cruelty of mechanized communication and the tendencies which we have come to note in the modern world. The quantitative pressure of modern knowledge has been responsible for the decay of oral dialectic and conversation. (191)

Although he believes face-to-face communication to be of the utmost importance, he warns that the mass media have corroded our confidence in it. Yet, I argue that in the 60 years since Innis has written this, many changes have taken place. The internet has put a halt to said decay; direct communication between individuals, albeit not face-to-face, has become more frequent again.

Innis states that his “bias is with the oral tradition, particularly as reflected in Greek civilization, and with the necessity of recapturing something of its spirit” (190). With the suspension of space, individuals with the same interests have the chance now to create their own “living tradition” (ibid.) and establish new relationships and networks that decentralize the electronic mass media and its one-directedness. Thus they may overcome what Innis calls “mechanized tradition” (ibid.) by, for instance, blogging, chatting in forums, and using social networking sites, which lead to a re-injection of their personal experience and feelings, their individual worldviews, and their creative thoughts (191) into what was formerly ‘mechanized.’ I am aware that “oral tradition” for Innis means personal contact so as to escape the influence of electronic media altogether. However, the hope he invests in a return to orality is formulated in a way that allows us to interpret him less narrowly. What he wishes for is a “stimulus which comes from contacts of one mind in free association with another mind in following up trains of ideas” (192). This fosters, according to Paul Heyer and David Crowley, “intellectual exchange and generate[s] a sceptical attitude toward entrenched dogma” (Innis xxxiv). And, indeed, the internet offers that anew: dialogue, decentralization, participation, exchange of ideas, and proliferation of individual opinion.
With this interpretation, however, one problem is impossible to ignore. Orality, according to Innis, is a typical characteristic of societies that have a bias towards time and mostly revert back to durable, heavy media. The internet, needless to say, does not fit into this pattern. Also, community is highly valued in these cultures, which contradicts the strong emphasis placed on individualism the West has fostered since the rise of the realist novel in the 19th century, which mirrored a new focus on interiority and individual experience through self-reflexivity (Watt 13-14; 60-62). Continuing in this tradition, the internet can, on the one hand, be seen as a fragmenting and highly individualizing medium, as it decentralizes and gives a platform to individual experience (just think of the innumerable blogs and Facebook profiles). On the other hand, though, the oral characteristics of centralization (used by Innis more in the sense of “coherence” than as an expression of political organization) are discoverable as well, as virtually everyone can participate in the internet, irrespective of class, gender, race, etc., and language barriers are mostly abolished.\(^5\)

New (virtual) communities emerge that are rather homogenous and whose members have a strong feeling of connectedness through shared interests. I conclude therefore that the internet balances characteristics of orality and literacy: It centralizes in so far as it includes the periphery more and more into the core and offers them easier access to participation. It decentralizes in so far as it abolishes the centre completely in favour of innumerable nodes in a network that renders the binary of margin and centre superfluous.

As fast-paced as the internet is, instantaneous communication must be seen as its primary objective. Globalization as we know it today has been made possible through email and other tools that allow for the coordination of large institutions – whether they are economic or governmental – on a day-to-day basis. In this vein, one can legitimately say that the internet has conquered the temporal limitations of former communications media. However, instantaneousness does not necessarily entail durability. The hieroglyphs on Egyptian pillars still disseminate their messages, even after multiple millennia. But can we expect the same to be true for the internet? Fortunately, the Web is not inherently bound to specific installations of hardware. If it should be the case that a hard drive stops working, the data that has been stored online can be easily accessed from other locations. Judging from this, the internet is a quite durable medium.

However, at times it is hard to find the same location within the proliferating Web twice. This is the case not only due to the sheer number of internet pages (and hyperlinks between them) but also because the construct itself is constantly in flux, as new sites and links are created, old ones disappear, and fresh connections are drawn. David Smith, in a

\(^5\) Again, as stated above, I do not mean to say that anyone can actually access the internet. Many limitations are still in place, regarding technical proficiency and education, access to hardware, government censorship, and so forth, which excludes large portions of the global population. Rather, I am speaking about a potential universality of the medium that transcends many of the older mass media’s restrictions.
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commentary in *The Observer*, quotes the concerns of Lynne Brindley, chief executive of the British Library who works in a project to archive internet pages that are relevant for the British construction of national and cultural identity. Says Brindley,

> If websites continue to disappear in the same way as those on President Bush and the Sydney Olympics – perhaps exacerbated by the current economic climate that is killing companies – the memory of the nation disappears too [...]. Historians of the future, citizens of the future, will find a black hole in the knowledge base of the 21st century.

The durability of the internet is thus not ensured and it may rightfully be considered a ‘perishable’ medium, which, on the long run, may lead to difficulties in maintaining an empire’s collective cultural memory. This is exactly what Innis meant when he worried in his “Plea for Time” that his contemporary society – and, after what was just gathered, our contemporary society is a hyperbolized version of his – has an “undue obsession with the immediate” (61) and that “the balance between time and space has been seriously disturbed with disastrous consequences to Western civilization” (76). This present-mindedness is dangerous in so far as the usefulness of teachings from the past for the present and the future are being neglected. If this emphasis on “the ephemeral” and “the superficial” (Innis 82), on entertainment and amusement should, indeed, proceed even more radically in the future, any form of continuity of knowledge will be lost and the world, reinvented with every new medial publication, becomes disconnected from the past and from humanity’s heritage and its sense of unity (an extreme scenario, I admit).

Concluding, I want to revise my former statement that the internet exists independently of hardware. Although the individual need not worry about it, there certainly is a requirement for the necessary servers and storage facilities, as well as wiring and infrastructure. The data, only stored electronically, thus becomes highly vulnerable, as official assessments, for instance by the Commission to Assess the Threat to the United States from Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) Attack, have shown. The fears are that an electromagnetic pulse momb could throw the US back into a state of a third-world country, simply because all digital money and information (or rather the ones and zeros that formerly represented them) disappears. These types of scenarios also influence popular culture (as in James Cameron’s TV series *Dark Angel*) and thus bear witness to the growing fears about what our utter dependence on technology may lead to, exacerbated by the replacement of ‘true’ knowledge with a temporally limited obtainment of information. Today, we need not know, we just need to be technologically literate enough to find what we need at a given point in time on the internet (and from other media resources). Indeed, it is not necessary for us to internalize any of it, as the plethora of potential resources promises to

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6 For more information, please refer to [www.empcommission.org](http://www.empcommission.org).
be inexhaustible and interminable. However, should the information cease to be accessible (as in Cameron’s scenario), the knowledge is irreversibly lost.

**Protest Cultures on the Internet**

As initially stated, consumer and anti-globalization protests are an apt example for both the potential offered and the challenges posed by the internet, and a valid example that supports the argumentation that the new medium offers more than the amusement and entertainment of other mass-consumed electronic media. The Clean Clothes Campaign, StopKillerCoke, and WakeUpWalmart are just three examples of huge transnational protest campaigns that, in their present form, have become possible only through the use of the Web. The organizational benefit is tremendous; instantaneous communication allows people from the whole world to coordinate activities, exchange information, and raise the awareness of potential and actual supporters through emailing lists and website presences. It becomes easier, for instance, to link rich Western consumers with employees of the multinational corporations and to have access to information about product cycles, working conditions, and environmental issues. Furthermore, the internet proves highly useful not only for administration but also for the direct protest actions of the grass roots activists. Nowadays, participation and engagement for a ‘good cause’ is merely a mouse click away. Other effectual online protest may be more subversive, such as the planned shutdown of corporate servers due to countless protestors using it at the same time. This method (also called “denial-of-service-attack”) was employed, for instance, in an online protest campaign by the groups “No One is Illegal” and “Libertad!” against the Lufthansa’s involvement in – and profit from – the deportation of illegal immigrants. The Lufthansa website was hit over 1.2 million times by over 13,000 protesters within hours, causing economic damage to the corporation.

Also, the campaigns have become more and more interactive, increasingly asking for the input of their participants, allowing for the incorporation of ideas from grass roots activists on organizing the campaign. Further democratization is effected through online news coverage by international projects like indymedia.org, which is described in the mission statement as “a collective of independent media organizations and hundreds of

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7 In his article “Individual Knowledge and the Internet,” Larry Sanger – co-founder of the Wikipedia project – heavily criticizes the common argument that “the Internet has made acquiring ‘a large body of knowledge’ unnecessary, since it can be ‘supplied externally’” (16). While acknowledging that this is the dominant belief among many educationists today, he holds it to be detrimental to “think that the tools of the Internet can replace the effortful, careful development of the individual mind” (ibid). Although I agree with this assessment, the fact that many revert back to the internet as substitute for knowledge remains unchanged.

8 The online protest took place during the annual Lufthansa shareholders meeting on June 20, 2001 in Cologne. For more information, please refer to www.noborder.org/archive/www.deportation-class.com/log/en181001.html and www.noborder.org/archive/www.deportation-class.com/log/en180701.html.

9 Sigrid Baringhorst observes that the internet “provide[s] interactive communication modes that encourage broader grassroots participation in discussions on issues of protest coordination […]” (3).
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journalists offering grassroots, non-corporate coverage” and as “a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth” (www.indymedia.org/en/static/about.shtml). Small, independent online papers and journals, largely with user-generated content, start to offer new ways of creating counter-publics that compete with the monopolies of huge broadcasting companies.

In this vein, the internet may be considered a centripetal force that allows a highly heterogeneous crowd of people to form a new community by sharing certain ideals and values and by taking action together – probably without ever meeting\textsuperscript{10}, as the relevance of space has been radically reduced insofar as communication is concerned. The questions that arise are, on the one hand, what types of communities originate within the internet and, on the other, why these new forms of protesting became essential in the first place. The latter question is more straightforwardly answered: since the technical means exist, it concomitantly becomes necessary to use them in order to not be ‘left behind.’ Without making the best possible use of the internet in a globalized world, most forms of protest lose their effectiveness, for it is impossible to fight multinational corporations such as Wal-Mart or Coca Cola, that source, produce, and distribute everywhere, without similarly mobilizing protesters from all over the world.\textsuperscript{11} Spatial expansion and “instantaneous network decision-taking” (Tully 209) become a necessity, as corporations, governments, and protesters engage in a networking race in which everyone tries to adapt to “the existing field of power relations” (Tully 220).\textsuperscript{12} The democratizing, decentralizing, and flexibilizing tendencies of the internet must thus be seen as a forceful counter reaction to and protest against the concentration and monopolization of both knowledge and power through that same medium.

Tully emphasizes the importance of networking in our age as an entirely new way of societal organization and its logic as transforming every other aspect of life (207). He also warns that a utopian belief in the democratizing powers of the internet can be harmful, as it glosses over the problem of “hegemonic network governance” (215). In many ways, the Web may be considered as one of Antonio Gramsci’s hegemonies, in so far as interactive participation is partly pro forma and without much consequence to its general structure and

\textsuperscript{10} Neera Chandhoke calls this new phenomenon “cyber-space activism.” She states: “Via this form of activism, members of a group who may never see each other come together, through cyberspace, around issues that they consider important” (41).

\textsuperscript{11} As with the question about what existed first, the chicken or the egg, it is in my view impossible to state authoritatively whether it is the technological possibility that causes companies (and thus, in reaction, protesters) to organize via the internet, or whether the need to productively react to growingly internationalized markets causes the internet’s importance and continued expansion. Therefore, this argument must appear cyclical.

\textsuperscript{12} This is also a tangible trend in politics, as public relations departments growingly take the new participatory culture into consideration and thus revert back to YouTube and Facebook to mobilize potential voters, as, for instance, in Barack Obama’s presidential campaign which largely embraced the possibilities of the internet in 2008. For more on this topic, please refer to Meikle.
purpose. Tully maintains that in any network, the nodes are far from equal. A transnational
corporation, for instance, has the power to shape a network according to its will, as it
can always pressurize smaller nodes into compliance, for instance by threatening the
removal of production to another facility in case of demands for increase of wages. The
new forms of online-based protest, thus, have to overcome many of the same obstacles
traditional activism was confronted with as hegemonic and imperial relations seem to
be something perpetuated by the system and not inherent in any medium *per se*. As the
internet transforms its users from consumers into producers, though, it is easier to raise
awareness and to engage in the struggle to change those nodes that one is personally
involved in. This is why a new form of protest culture has become necessary: to keep up
with the ever-increasing bias towards space. It is highly ineffective to protest locally while
the adversary acts globally, which is ironic when talking about *anti*-globalization activism.
While fighting those grievances that have been “brought about” by the new opportunities
of communication, one must resort to that same means in order to reach the public. Kahn
and Keller therefore make the useful distinction between the protesters’ “globalization-
from-below” and the governments’/corporations’ “globalization-from-above” (83).

Reverting to the first question, specifically what type of communities are made
possible, one must first observe how communities were built up before the internet. As they
were based on face-to-face communication, communities mostly consisted of people related
through kinship, their work, or living close to each other. Through the Web, though, we
have more choice. Thus, common interest and shared values become decisive while space
decreases in relevance. The relationships might be less intense as they lack the component
of personal contact, but they might also be more desired, as they are never induced by
mere necessity and are often independent of physical appearance, or personal background
such as financial situation, gender, or class.13 This new form of ‘tribalism’, if you will, is a
centrifugal force to be reckoned with for it seems to break the entirety of internet users into
smaller and smaller communities and effect a fragmentation and diversification. Heyer
and Crowley state that Innis

attached great importance to what he called the rise of ‘cultural disturbances’
in the twentieth century, by which he meant the assertion and reassertion of
particularisms among regions, groups, and collectivities – what the writer
and critic Octavio Paz has called the ‘rebellion of exceptions’ in the face of

13 It is true that social networking sites enjoy an increasing popularity. Focusing on physical
representation and documentation in profiles, photographs, and videos, those pages most certainly do not
ignore said factors. However, many of the connections on those sites are virtual representations of face-to-
face relationships, thus of people who have actually had personal encounters before. What I am referring
to here are those rather ‘anonymous’ networks of people who establish *new* relationships based on shared
interest over the internet – especially, as this is our prime example, in the larger framework of anti-corporate
campaigning.
modern universalisms, a trend that has escalated since Innis wrote. (Innis xxxi)

This leads to the instability of a given empire. From the perspective of protest cultures speaking, then, this is a desirable effect, as it is the destabilization of the powers-that-be they wish to achieve. However, should these particularisms come into existence not through conviction and shared values but only because online protest is so easy (as aforementioned “just a click away”) and does not require real involvement and conviction, then the destabilization of the empire is directionless and ineffectual. The resolve of people will be lacking which is needed to mould the weakened network into the new, sought-after form.

Conclusion

Having reflected on Innis’s theory and its applicability to the internet, I am reassured in my opinion that the Web should neither be seen as just one more media tool to be used by the hegemon and operating under what Gramsci calls the subaltern’s “mask of consent” nor as fantastic democratic tool that has the power of turning all users into equals. Thus I align with Kahn when he says: “It is not that today’s internet is either a wholly emancipatory or oppressive technology, but rather that it is an ongoing struggle that contains contradictory forces” (80). The internet both centralizes and decentralizes, destroys old communities and creates new ones, is expressive of a monopoly of knowledge yet concomitantly contains subversive potential. Furthermore, it helps its users to transcend both space and time – the latter, however, only through instantaneity, not durability, which is a result of the West’s unhealthy present-mindedness and may lead, on the long run, to a traumatizing loss of shared cultural knowledge. The constant threat posed by the discontinuity and instability of human communication through the mass media – what Innis calls ‘mechanized tradition’ – can, as I have argued, be reduced by the internet, but surely not completely obliterated. Yet, for some short-term goals, such as those of consumer activism, the internet is crucial. And if those anti-globalization campaigns are successful and manage to move our attention away from “totalizing macrodimensions in order to focus on the local, the specific, the particular, the heterogeneous and the microlevel of everyday experience” (Kahn 82), then we might create a world in which “sustainability” is more than a buzzword, in which we begin to consider the future again. We might just be able to use the internet not only to transform its contents, its debates, and its underlying power structures, but also to make it obsolete – we must only stay flexible and adaptable enough to react to the fast-paced media landscape out there.
Works Consulted


Innis, Harold A. The Bias of Communication. 2nd ed. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2008.


